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ABSTRACT

The author describes the development and evolution of an undergraduate interdisciplinary sociology course which he created in 1958 at Harvard College. Staff for the course was drawn from sociology, social psychology, anthropology, political science, social history, and law. The aim of the course was to examine modes of research and intellectual themes with the goal of encouraging students to understand and observe more through their ability to relate readings to observations. Readings included chapters from Tocqueville's "Democracy in America," Whyte's "Street Corner Society," and Lane's "Political Ideology." The course was structured into three tracks: lectures which the author gave or presided over and in which he discussed readings and supplementary materials; section meetings led by staff members for discussion of lectures and readings; and the term paper, which represented a major grade for the course. Students were encouraged to undertake a small scale empirical study as opposed to a theoretical or library based paper for their term project. Changes occurred in the course during the cry for relevance in the 1960s. Major obstacles during this era were students' cynical attitudes toward society and its institutions and their conclusion that they already knew what was worth knowing. (KC)

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THE UNDERGRADUATE SOCIOLOGY CURRICULUM: THE LIBERAL ARTS FUNCTION*

David Riesman

American Sociological Association--Monday, August 27, 1979

My original intention in this paper was to discuss the value of joint sociology-anthropology departments for undergraduate teaching of sociology. When I was at the University of Chicago, anthropology and sociology had only recently divided; my colleague, Everett Hughes, had been a student and then a member of the joint Department; Lloyd Warner was a member; both of us were also members of the Committee on Human Development which joined anthropology and sociology to a psychoanalytically-oriented social psychology. Similarly, when I came to Harvard in 1958, the old Department of Social Relations brought these fields together, along with personality and clinical psychology; we attracted at the graduate level unusual graduate students and also junior faculty who would specialize in one wing of the joint Department, but be exposed to all the wings, and the same held true in many of the courses. In the days of Florence Kluckhohn and the late Clyde Kluckhohn, no one could get through without anthropological exposure, and at the graduate level, a field-work requirement. Now that Sociology has split off and become a separate Department, first at the graduate and later at the undergraduate level, I see

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*Panel on "Issues in Teaching: Alternative Curriculum Models." I am indebted to the Lilly Endowment for support which has facilitated preparation of this essay. In the typescript, materials are included which were cut to save time in oral presentation.

the drawbacks of the lack of a field-work component; it is available, as James Davis panelist) (a fellow/has now brought us survey research at the undergraduate level, but it is optional.

Hence, I thought it would be interesting to focus on those departments in liberal arts colleges, such as Swarthmore, Carleton, Smith, and Oberlin, where sociology and anthropology had not split off;* to study their syllabi and examinations; and to seek to understand how, by careful selection of social anthropologists and open-minded archaeologists, one could maintain a joint department in the face of tendencies toward fission. However, this proved impossible to do in a short paper.

And so I concluded that I could make a concrete contribution to our Panel by describing the course that, with a staff of eight to eleven section leaders, I taught in Harvard College for nearly two decades under the title "Character and Social Structure in America," a course which might be defined as a mini joint department course. This course at that time was an innovation for Harvard; hence it was one that depended very much on the setting in which I was able to create it. Academic innovations do not exist in a vacuum, but in a context which, in Clifford Geertz's term, requires "thick description" if it is to be understood and any possible connection drawn between one academic setting and another. What is feasible depends on the composition of the faculty (including conflicts of personality and "school"); the preparation and level of effort of the student body, which even in selective institutions like Harvard can be quite heterogeneous; the extent of departmentalism at the undergraduate level; the shifting attitudes toward requirements; the kind of administrative leadership faculty and students were prepared to

*There are a few research universities, notably Vanderbilt University, which maintain joint departments.

accept, etc.* As the title of the course indicates, it provided leeway for many areas of study; and, as we shall see, varied from year to year, depending somewhat on the staff I was able to get together, and also on the changing attitudes of students as these shifted quite dramatically from the initial years to the attitudes of the late 1960's. In other words, the content of the course was only one of its main purposes. The way the course was taught was, of course, equally important.

I had been recruited to Harvard with the specific assignment of undergraduate teaching.** I interpreted this responsibility to include helping

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*I had long since learned the error of an earlier judgment (see, e.g., Constraint and Variety in American Education, University of Nebraska Press, 1956; rev. pprbk. ed., 1958, Chapter 1) that there is an academic procession in which graduate students trained in a relatively small number of leading research universities carry ideals and agendas of these institutions to their new locales. On the contrary, each new locale imposes its own, often at first invisible constraints--there are discontinuities, and not only positive goals based on the local setting, but what Erik Erikson might call negative identities. (See for a fuller discussion, Richard R. Johnson,"Innovation and Influence Among American Colleges and Universities," unpublished manuscript, abbreviated in Change Magazine [citation coming].) There are many institutions which will tell a Harvard Ph.D.: "This isn't Harvard"--and this carries specific connotations of warning as to what not to expect.

Furthermore, I have come to believe that research on learning is more important than research on teaching: students mediate the processes of teaching in individuated ways, and we all are aware that a teacher who is admirable for one student is not suitable for another--even though when students are aggregated for those many institutions where the legend now is "teach or perish," student evaluations are often not disaggregated by the level of the student or by seeking to interview graduates who are neither as subject to manipulation nor as impressed by entertainers as they might have been at the time when they were undergraduate students. Cf. the review by Vernon H. Smith, "Learning vs. Teaching" [of N. L. Gage's Scientific Basis of the Art of Teaching, Teachers College Press, 1978] in the Review of Education, vol. 5, no. 2, spring 1979, pp. 97-100; see also, Judith Dozier Hackman and Thomas D. Taber,"Patterns of Undergraduate Performance Related to Success in College," American Educational Research Journal, vol. 16, spring 1979, no. 2, pp. 117-38.

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advanced doctoral students and some junior faculty, whom I chose for my staff, to gain supervised experience in teaching with a good deal of mutual education and mutual support. I drew the staff not only from sociology and social psychology, but also from anthropology, political science, social history, and law. Recognizing that one could not seek a sociological and anthropological approach to the contemporary United States without the leverage of some knowledge of the American past and without comparison with other more or less industrialized countries, I sought in recruiting staff not only those with undergraduate or graduate experience in history, or actually in the field of history, but also both non-Americans and Americans who had lived for substantial periods in Western Europe and/or in the less industrialized world.

This mix was already a beginning for mutual learning. It was also a start for creating the materials of the course. I sought to make use of each

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** Except for individuals with phenomenal energy, and those who are willing to sacrifice their scholarship and research entirely to their teaching, innovative teaching requires that the teacher not be asked to do too much of it. The laws now prevalent in many states, or the formulae which distribute teaching loads on a head-count basis or in some similar presumably fair manner, are detrimental to imaginative teaching. The course described in this essay would not have been possible if I had not had the freedom my chair gave me to select my own agenda and to limit the amount of formal teaching I did. Similarly, in work with doctoral candidates, because the course herein described asked more of them than would be required as graders or section leaders in the ordinary course of things, I made particular effort to see to it that they, too, did not do "too much" teaching, and sometimes asked them in their own interest to withdraw from the course in order to complete their dissertations. However, I had repeated arguments with a former Dean of our Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, who was convinced that graduate students should do a minimum amount of teaching and finish their dissertations and get out as quickly as possible. At least in fields where, unlike some of the natural sciences, the writer of a dissertation works alone, many become blocked and lose their self-confidence if they have not the compensating experience of success in a group of mutually supportive teachers--although of course there are to this generalization a number of exceptions.

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member's expertise, experience, and interest. Nominally, ours was a spring-term course, but the staff would meet in the fall,and we exchanged endless memoranda concerning possible readings and modes of organizing the course for the spring term. We adapted ourselves to changing staff interests, on the premise, not only that colleagues should teach books that they liked (and we used only books, not texts or collections of readings), but also that they should not be asked to teach books they actively disliked, since in the general atmosphere of Harvard, aggressively unsympathetic criticism of the works of leading scholars could be paralyzing for students.

In the effort to put together a somewhat coherent whole, we were often far from successful. We made clear to each other and to students that our aim was not coverage of areas, but rather a sampling of modes of research and intellectual themes (such as those provided, for example, by Tocqueville and by Thorstein Veblen) which we could carry with us as part of our intellectual equipment throughout the course. Again and again, we emphasized to students how inevitably limited our scope was, and that vastly more was known (with more added each year in the way sociologists of science have described) than we could ever begin to master.

The course was innovative for Harvard in that teaching and mutual learning were proceeding on two levels at the same time: we were teaching the students and we were teaching each other how to teach the students and how different students learned or failed and/or refused to learn. At the weekly and sometimes semi-weekly luncheon and dinner meetings of the staff, I took it as my responsibility, especially for the advanced graduate students, to help them become aware of some of the dilemmas of undergraduate teaching, based on mutual observation of each others' sections and lengthy discussions of problems which they raised from their class discussions and experiences.

Also, we were attentive to the feedback from the students. They were sometimes critical of the lack of coherence of the course. Things did not always fit neatly together or follow each other like A, B, C.* And we were to some extent affected by the changing foci of their interests. One other form of learning we hoped for in the course was that students in the discussions at their section meetings would learn from each other. This was unpredictable, and only the most skillful discussion leaders could help/make this happen.

Neither my more senior colleagues nor I were when the course began, or would now claim to be, experts in the art and incipient science of teaching. While we made it our effort in the section meetings to repress the narcissistic filibusterer and/to evoke the shy, the former task was too much for many of the section leaders and, at times, too much for me. (Sometimes, we would take

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*Since the course had no examination, I sought to persuade students not to take notes in the way that they are accustomed to doing, in order to get down everything which might be on the exam. Rather, I suggested to them that they listen attentatively, perhaps make a few free associations in the form of notes, and then, after the lecture or lecture-discussion, keep a kind of diary in which they would mix their own thoughts about the material, with the substantive matter presented in readings and lectures. However, most students could not break the habit of assiduous note-taking, and for some (I know this is occasionally true for me when I attend an ASA session) taking notes is a way to keep awake! Furthermore, even with Harvard undergraduates, it proved difficult, and in earlier years especially for the Radcliffe women, to learn that different kinds of readings required different kinds of attention. For example, we read Tocqueville with detailed explication de texte, and could spend a long time "unpacking" a single sentence, but did not expect community studies or certain other contemporary works to be read in the same fashion.

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such a person aside separately and talk to him--such individuals in earlier years were almost invariably male--and ask them not to raise their hands, that we would call on them when we felt it appropriate. But such a tactic with a rebellious and individualistic student body was not always successful.) When I visited sections, I could give the section leader comments of what would seem to the students of teaching the very simplest instructions which were nonetheless novel for the individual person. I would, for example, observe that (quite apart from political orientation), some section leaders noticed students sitting on their left and not on their right, or vice versa. We would like to have had snapshots of each student, because our section leaders went into class with the advantage of a questionnaire (resisted by some students) which gave background or what survey researchers call "face sheet" data on the students (explicitly, we did not ask for a student's grade point average, for we wanted it to be clear that neither admission to the course--which was done by lottery when it was over-subscribed--or assignment to sections depended on grades). But it would have been quicker and easier for section leaders to memorize the names of all their students if they had also had snapshots to attach to the questionnaires in the first few sections meetings.*

Another apparently equally simple injunction I would draw from visits to sections was the frequent use of sarcasm which indeed is rampant at Harvard among both students and faculty. Even junior faculty who had been teaching for ten years were astonished when I would say to them that sarcasm stings, and that they often humiliated students; they still saw themselves as young and, as it were, weightless; how could anything they said hurt anybody? But sarcasm is almost never weightless, though in cases of dealing with filibusterers, it was sometimes an essential tool.

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*When I recently offered what our Sociology Department terms a "conference course," in effect a pro-seminar, in American higher education, I carried to each session two-sided "placecards" for each student, in the hope that students would come to speak directly to each other by name and not only conduct dialogues with me. (It is something taken for granted at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, where students in large lectures sit in a horseshoe-shaped amphitheater with assigned seats, as at Harvard Law School, but in an undergraduate course in Harvard College, this repeated action of bringing in and distributing the cards, as one would at many kinds of conferences, had symbolic as well as practical utility.)

The structure of the course consisted of the usual formal lectures, most often given by me, sometimes by visitors or by staff members (if the subject was in their special domain) twice a week. And sections were held once a week by each staff member. Section meetings in general have low status at Harvard, partly because of the students' belief that especially Teaching Fellows are by definition not big-shots (even though they often know more about many subjects than the big-shots), and also partly reflecting the drill-like character which some sections in large courses have. In this course, however, the sections were at least as highly regarded and better attended than the lectures.

Sections met nominally for an hour-and-a-half, but generally ran for two hours. Though we tried to find seminar rooms--no easy task--and to have sections no larger than the nineteen or twenty that could sit around a single table and face each other, scheduling and space problems could mean that we would have eight and sometimes thirty students in a section, though rarely that many, almost necessarily arranged in inner and outer rows--we gained, if we did not already have, a great appreciation of the importance of architecture, what Martin Trow terms private space, in the quality of learning and teaching that is feasible.

As time passed, some section leaders came to have their own reputations, but we made every effort in the generally relaxed flux at Harvard not to permit switching of sections; on the contrary, we built sections as we built the staff, seeking a variety of students in terms of background in each section, and scattering older people: Nieman Fellows, foreign visitors from the Center for International Affairs, and so forth.

Along with the substantive knowledge contained in readings, lectures, and section meetings, our staff sought to draw on personal qualities among students in terms of what they could contribute and, while these remained reasonably constant, the shifting character of student outlooks necessitated different strategies. Above all, we sought to cultivate curiosity, so that the physical and human world around a student would become more vivid. Rather than approaching the world with either the deadpan diligence of many of our students at that time, or the residual cavalier insouciance of the gentleman's C, which later turned into the anti-gentleman's B, we wanted our students to be capable of observing and understanding more, through ability to relate readings to observation. This included the willingness to be surprised, as against a temptation to assume a blasé attitude--and a willingness to change and to be self-critical.

When I came to Harvard, a mid-term and a three-hour final examination were required in all large courses. I had to defend before the Committee on Educational Policy the justification for dispensing with examinations and substituting instead a long term paper, plus shorter papers which were often assigned by section leaders as exercises to assure that students had done and understood the readings.* The grade in the course depended on the long paper, as well as the student's performance in the section meetings. The section leader had the task of seeing to it that outlines of these papers were submitted early, and we continuously urged students to spend less time in data gathering and more time in analysis and writing than they were inclined to do if left to their own devices. The section leader graded the students' papers, consulting others and me where appropriate, and also wrote letters to students evaluating their papers--an extent of comment not infrequent in smaller,

*I should make clear that I am not in principle opposed to written examinations; many can be quite illuminating. See, e.g., my essay, "The Impact of Examinations," and that of Thomas Shelling, in Leon Bramson, ed., Examining in Harvard College: A Collection of Essays by Members of the Harvard Faculty, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1963, pp. 71-87.

liberal arts colleges, but at that time--though no longer--a rarity at Harvard. The section leader's role in facilitating the work of students on their papers and then in responding to these tended to make for close relations, and I continuously run into earlier alumni/ae of the course who have kept in touch with their section leaders since graduation.

At the beginning, I read all the papers myself after they had been graded and letters written, putting the grade and letters aside until I had formed my own judgment, and then writing to the student in a way that took account of the section leader's comments and avoiding redundancy. If I had any doubts about my letter and its possible effect on the student or its possible unfairness in the light of the section leader's greater knowledge of the student, I would share a draft of the letter with the section leader before sending it to the student, and of course always sent the section leader a copy. I regarded these letters a a form of teaching both for the section leader and the student --I made clear to the students that they were to make two copies of their paper, one which would be retained in my file and another for them to keep. Eventually, I could not maintain the task I had set myself of reading all the papers, and my responses were often so delayed as not to mean much to the student who had gotten the paper in and gone on to other things, or was sometimes embarrassed that I would expend time and thought on a paper which the student had not expected me to see. Thereafter, I read papers which were recommended to me by section leaders, or where I had myself served to advise the student concerning some particular topic where the section leader had felt less adequate to help. For me, reading papers was both more interesting and valuable an enterprise than reading an occasional examination paper, giving me a better sense of what our students were concerned about, what their intellectual and personal vitamin deficiencies

were toward which we might address ourselves, as against their strengths which the competitive atmosphere of Harvard College encouraged them to nourish at the expense of taking chances in areas where they felt less self-confident.

When our course began, Harvard College students were reasonably at home in the library and, in many instances, in the laboratory; there was no other large course which dispensed with a final exam and which encouraged students to choose a topic themselves. We did not insist that they do a small-scale empirical study, but we did our best to persuade students of the value of this; those who continued to demur could do theoretical and library-based papers. But with the majority who were willing to take a try at field work of some sort, we had to overcome the misapprehension that, for empirical work, one needed at least a hundred survey-type interviews done with a random sample. Since we drew students from all fields of interest in the College, including many students who had not yet decided on a major, we needed to redefine the presuppositions many of them had concerning what is "science." Frequently, this was a misapprehended natural science model. An empirical paper would have to be a "sample," for example, of a hundred random interviews with fellow students chosen by random numbers. I would explain that the fellow students were not a universe whose boundaries were known, that one did not know what questions to ask if one started with little knowledge and only some minimal preconceptions, and that in any case students rarely lived as isolates, and that one might want to get at student social networks and explore the definition, for example, of what friendship meant as an initial foray

with a small, non-representative group--something which might later become, and sometimes did become, the basis for a senior thesis or even a dissertation.*

We defined "science" to mean pretty much what Martin Trow suggests in his discussion of the moral discipline of the disciplines: namely, doing what was appropriate in the circumstances, with as much objectivity as possible, while recognizing that this was a goal and not something one could attain, but whose methods included looking for negative evidence and reporting negative or uninterpretable findings, as well as writing down clearly exactly what one did: for example, in gaining access or describing as fully as possible what the setting was like in an interview, and how the interviewer's own reactions might perhaps have influenced responses.** We made amply clear that this was not an introduction in a formal way to "sociological methods" as these might be taught in a course for prospective majors.

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*Perhaps I should make clear that, although the course served as a de facto introduction to sociology for a number of students interested in the field, our effort did not aim to enlarge the number of sociology majors. At the graduate level, my colleagues and I have been inclined to the belief that, as a field of scholarship, sociology is only rarely eight-years deep, and that undergraduates are better prepared for graduate work in sociology by any number of other subjects: classical studies and history in general; economics; one of the natural sciences; any sufficiently demanding program of broad, liberal education combined with specialized work. Fortunately, this was not a time when FTE or "body count" determined the fate of departments, individuals within them, and whole institutions.

**See Martin Trow, "Higher Education and Moral Development," AAUP Bulletin, vol. 62, no. 1, April 1976, pp. 20-27.

At the beginning, our students were awed in the face of the authority of books they read. Or they were diffident and did not believe that they could venture out on their own, do some interviews, or engage in participant-observation, when they were not already trained social scientists.* In other words, our effort was to persuade students that it was legitimate in a General Education course to undertake what might be thought of as a kind of pretest or prolegomenon to a longer study such as one might do if one had ample time and resources, and that they could make a contribution of certainly some interest, even originality.

We decided that we ourselves should published volumes of student papers, and published three volumes in the first years of the course, one of them containing papers based exclusively on educational settings, as a way of proving to students that they could do publishable bits of work, and picking a great variety of papers for the volumes so that students would not be over-powered by the most talented.

We began the course with three weeks on closely-read, selected chapters from Tocqueville's Democracy in America, as framing many of the themes

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*I recall a young woman--and in those days and even now it is the women who are inclined to be more diffident--with whom I used an example drawn from Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents, where in a footnote Freud comments that there is evidence for the death instinct or the instinct of aggression in the fact that the children of permissive parents are often extremely aggressive against such parents. When I asked this young woman whether this fitted her observations as a baby-sitter in the homes of highly permissive parents, she was shocked at the very notion that she could contradict Freud--you can see how remote the era was, because today many women will contradict Freud almost automatically, for they have learned he is a sexist! But asked to observe closely, the young woman then noticed in her baby-sitting sessions that permissive parents were often rather indifferent parents vis-á-vis whom children had understandable aggressions, and that one did not need to posit anything like a death instinct or an instinct of aggression to explain what was in fact provoked behavior.

to which we would recur in lectures and sections; then we followed with William F. Whyte, Jr.'s, Street Corner Society, emphasizing the appendix in which Whyte so beautifully describes his own problems as a field worker, including his ethical dilemmas. (Herbert Gans has a short appendix on just such problems in The Urban Villagers.) We followed Street Corner Society with a monograph, "Good Fortune: Second Chance Community," by Alicja Iwanska: a participant-observation community study by a Polish-born sociologist-ethnographer of a small rural community in the Northwest--among other things, comparing her attitudes as well as methods with those of William Whyte, and also her European perspective / with that of Tocqueville. We often / read Robert Lane's Political Ideology, to show how much one could find out concerning Tocqueville's themes by interviews with fifteen men in a New Haven housing project. For those considering field work, we recommended portions of Rosalie Wax's admirable book, Doing Fieldwork: Warnings and Advice.*

As I have already said, we did not insist that students do papers based on interviews or field work of some sort, but rather that this provided a relatively cost-free opportunity to explore and, under supervision, test oneself in a new kind of skill. We encouraged/ students to turn in drafts of their final papers well ahead of time, on which/ the section leader could then make comments and suggestions, giving the student an/ opportunity to rewrite and improve the paper --not many left themselves time enough to make use of this option.

While many students jumped at the chance to develop a paper which took off from personal experience, for example, in tutoring or in the civil rights

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*University of Chicago Press, 1971. See also, William F. Whyte's "On Making the Most of Participant Observation," The American Sociologist, vol. 14 (Feb. 1979), 56-66; also, comments by Robert A. Stebbins and by this writer and others, "Toward Amateur Sociology: A Proposal for the Profession," The American Sociologist, November 1978.

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movements, others were stumped by the abundance of options and had no idea of a possible topic. To prevent last-minute papers, and eliminate the possibilities of plagiarism which had been feared by some of the members of the Committee on Educational Policy when we argued for the privilege of dispensing with a final examination (as if cheating could not occur in formal, proctored examinations!), students had to decide on their paper topics early, and, where the section leader had any reason for misgivings, the issue would come before our full staff. Thus, we vetoed papers that seemed tinged with voyeurism, or the many which were obviously over-ambitious and would not give students a feeling that they had accomplished some small, manageable bit of work. (Even so, in all short-term empirical undergraduate work, there is always the chance that students will at the last moment be turned away from a research site, or otherwise end up with negative results--a relatively riskless enterprise in the natural sciences, where such results are publishable, but a hazard for an undergraduate in the social sciences, and one against which we sought to provide protection, e.g., back-up projects, or we permitted the student to write a full description of the original project and the reasons for its miscarriage.)

To summarize: the course proceeded on three tracks, whose congruence was seldom tidy. One track was the lectures, which I gave or presided over, in which I discussed readings and materials supplementary to the lectures; questions and discussions during the lecture were encouraged, and proved feasible at least if we had a proper sort of place to meet, even with 300 or more students; and, by meeting at the noon hour, we could continue with students who cared to stay on for additional discussion, sometimes also continuing discussion over lunch in one of the residential Houses. In such an instance, we would arrange for a small dining room in the hour following the

lecture, where students--and often several tutors and I myself--could continue the conversation. This might also occur with sections which met in the late afternoon and be followed by supper in one of the Houses, a supper to which I would sometimes be invited.

The second track was the section meeting for discussion of lectures and readings; we sought to teach the course almost entirely from paperback books which students could bring to class, and where in the best instances a spirit of eager mutuality developed. Sometimes questions about lectures and readings raised in section meetings would be brought back to me for further treatment in a lecture. It was not uncommon for me to devote a full hour's lecture to a question that a student had raised, thus departing from the planned outline and syllabus and making the course still more untidy. The sections would also give students a chance orally to outline their prospective term papers for criticism and comment by fellow students; we sought to create a non-invidious atmosphere in which students would not hesitate to bring up tentative plans, failures, and mistakes.

And, as already made clear, the third track was the term paper itself. The diverse interests and experiences of the staff of the course made it possible for us to refer students among each other, myself of course included, when students were pursuing specialized topics for which his or her particular section leader did not feel especially competent.*

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*We followed a similar practice when it came to grading and evaluating papers, where maintaining any degree of equity among the grades given in the different sections was always an issue of discussion and exchange of papers and views. Zelda Gamson and others have written about "personalism," and how difficult it is, when one has gotten to know a student well, to give a low grade on the basis of institution-wide norms, particularly if the student has made notable progress and worked indefatigably. But a senior writing simultaneously an honors thesis might, by poor timing, do a makeshift job on the course paper, and yet be so talented and write so well as to turn in a paper far superior to the average. Here "personalism" could work in reverse,

While as we have noted, some students wanted to undertake over-ambiticus projects or suffered from a surfeit of options, there were others who had no idea of a possible topic. An illustration will help. I remember talking to a shy Radcliffe student who came from a small New Hampshire town and could not

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*(continued from p. 16)with the disappointed section leader tempted to grade the paper down because of recognition that the student could have done a far superior piece of work. (We never suffered from the kind of teaching-assistant revolt where all students were given A's to discredit "the system" that Richard F. Tomasson describes during the time he was Department Chairman at the University of New Mexico.See, "Report of the Department of Sociology, 1971-1972," University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1973 [mimeographed].) Because students did on the whole extend themselves, the course gained a reputation for giving high grades prior to the time of grade inflation. Thus, while scaring away some highly grade-conscious students who knew they could get an assured honor grade on an exam and were uncertain about how they would fare on a long paper in a low-consensus field, we also did attract a relatively small number of students who saw the course as a "gut." Sometimes, they would deliver papers late to section leaders with whom they had not in fact worked to develop a topic. In rare cases, we suspected and then tracked down plagiarism, often a paper written for another course (which might have been legitimate if agreed upon in advance with both instructors); we reported all such cases--a practice many have now abandoned out of a cowardly fear of "hassles"--we would refuse to accept the paper and fail the student. When as was frequently the case, these were graduating seniors, there was a period during which some would claim that I was sending them to their death in Vietnam--an allegation which, in discussions with the Senior Tutors (in effect, decentralized deans) of the residential Houses, appeared to be unfounded, since virtually no Harvard student went in voluntarily to Vietnam, although a few braved the general campus climate to go voluntarily. One student threatened to shoot me, a white Virginian who had gotten by, according to his Senior Tutor, to the second term of his senior year despite repeated assaults on tutors and other similar actions, and I will not say that I was not frightened. The fact that, in cases of doubt, several of us would read a paper was some defense against an increasingly adversary and litigious atmosphere in the later 1960's. At the same time, since the number of such controversies, and general problems of oversight, grew as the numbers in the course grew, which could result from a willingness of the section leaders (limited in number by the size of our dinner table to a maximum of eleven) to take the maximum of three sections, so that at one time we had over 600 students in Sanders Theater, then our largest lecture hall, and one in which discussion from the floor was almost impossible, I limited enrollment because the load on me of having to deal with a certain proportion of "difficult" cases proved too great, as well as because we preferred a more intimate setting where questions could be asked at lectures. I also consciously reduced the charismatic potential of a lecture, refusing, for example, to end the hour on a neat summary or epigrammatic remark. I cannot say that I became more matter-of-fact in the late sixties as some of my more politicized colleagues became more passionate, because I retained the belief that students should hear sentences that were complex and contained words many did not know, hoping perhaps quixotically that they would look them up in the dictionary or not be afraid to ask what they meant, thus avoiding what became among some sociologists and psychologists outside the experimentalist fields a kind of rap session argot which highly educated students also used to demonstrate their egalitarianism.

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see what she could do for a paper which might produce new knowledge. It turned out that her father was a small businessman, and that through him she knew the other small businessmen of the community. I suggested to her that she examine an essay by Martin Trow in the AJS on the attitudes of small businessmen toward McCarthy in Bennington in the 1950's,* and that she interview the businessmen she knew concerning their ideologies about politics, the state and federal governments, the chances they had in life. She did just that, managing a few really searching interviews, and doing a paper that made a contribution.

The letters section leaders wrote to their students, of which I always received a copy, concerning their papers and often their general performance in the section, were responsive both to the paper's contributions and to its limitations. These letters, the staff meetings and memoranda, and the visits I would pay to sections when their leaders felt sufficiently secure to invite me, gave me a sense of the abilities of individual staff members as teacher-scholars and generally also as potential or actual researchers, which proved useful to many in helping them in the post-doctoral job search.**

My sense of what students needed (as distinguished from what they wanted) changed as we moved into the period of the 1960's, the era of the cry for "relevance." Not only the readings but the papers students chose to write changed considerably. It no longer took enormous effort to get students to go out into the field. Many preferred the field to the library, especially if some kind of activism were involved. It was at this point that I concluded it was necessary to encourage students to do, for example, small bits of social history based on bibliographic sources, rather than oral history which had in the meantime become popular. We sought consciously to be "counter-

* Martin A. Trow, "Small Businessmen, Political Tolerance, and Support for McCarthy," American Journal of Sociology, vol. 64 (1958), pp. 279-80.

** I am referring in the text, not primarily to the detailed letters of recommendation I would write to the many liberal arts colleges and comprehensive state colleges which sought capable undergraduate teachers (as, contrary to legend, research universities also sought, in addition to promise as a researcher), but rather to the self-confidence those looking for positions might have in facing the prospect of teaching two or three courses per term outside their area of specialization (on which they might be able to teach a course for a few students every second year). Some could then enter the crucial and stressful years prior to the decision on tenure with some leeway to prepare for publication all or sections of the dissertation, or to do other writing. This issue was perhaps especially exigent for the increasing number of two-career families in which a more equitable division of domestic labor was sought between the spouses (a few such couples taught in the course, either simultaneously or in sequence).

cyclical," insisting on the unattainable ideal of objectivity as students grew more politicized and ideological in the late 1960's. For example, if Elliot Liebow's Tally's Corner was a popular reading, as it was, I insisted that it be read only if we read conjointly Horace Cayton's autobiography, Long Old Road (published in paperback by the Press at our Chairman's university), which gave an account of a black whose father had been a Republican newspaperman in a city which cruelly shipped Chinese out to sea much as happens now to the "boat people," but where eminent Negroes were not aggressively discriminated against; I was opposed to the implicit determinism of Tally's Corner, as many blacks have also been.* I also did not want our black students to have

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*One of the leaders in taking this position is a former colleague in the course, Orlando Patterson (Patterson's wife, Nerys Patterson, also taught in the course). See, e.g., Orlando Patterson, "Toward a Future That Has No Past --Reflections on the Fate of Blacks in the Americas," Public Interest, spring 1972, pp. 25-62.

The mention of Orlando Patterson brings up an issue sometimes raised in discussions of the course by others. They would say, for example, how good it was that we had on an average thirty to sixty percent of the staff who were women at a time when Harvard had very few women teachers as well as later when there was an effort to recruit more. I would respond that the women could find their own role models, not only among senior Harvard faculty such Cora DuBois or Beatrice Whiting or, later, Emily Vermeule, but vicariously as in the interest in Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, and the writings of Alice Rossi, Ann Douglas and many, many other scholars. The point of having women teaching in the course, insofar as the "role model" issue is concerned, was for the sake of the men in the student body and on the staff who needed exposure to bright and alive women scholars, capable of both nurturance and rigor. Similarly, while it was helpful for our black students to have a distinguished colleague such as Orlando Patterson teach in the course, it was even more important for white staff and students to encounter a person of such intransigent integrity, scholarship, and breadth of cultivation. Likewise, the principal importance in our milieu of having two scholarly Jesuits (one of them Chilean, who has since left the Order) teach in the course was not primarily for the sake of our Catholic students, who in the aggressively secularist environment sometimes feel under a good deal of peer and even faculty pressure, but again for the sake of the non-Catholics in a locale where Protestants and Jews have had a fairly appalling history of anti-Catholic prejudice.

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to suffer with the kind of somewhat specious envy from our hard-working, generally upper-middle-class, highly educated and affluent whites (and we had highly educated and affluent upper-middle-class blacks as well), who obtained vicarious enjoyment from reading about apparently spontaneous lower-class black life.

Similarly, our effort to enhance curiosity had to take different forms among undergraduates (and graduate students also) in the last ten years. At the outset, student curiosity was limited by inhibition and self-mistrust. But by the late 1960's, curiosity was inhibited by a cynical or nihilistic attitude toward society and its institutions: everything was corrupt, everything was a "sell," and since we already knew that, what was there to find out about it? In this conclusion by students that they already knew what society was like, and that it was rotten, they were encouraged by some senior scholars and younger faculty, as well as by events, and it became difficult to encourage an uninhibited curiosity which would subject their now conventional radicalism to scrutiny. Especially perhaps among Harvard College undergraduates, the narcissism which led to the conclusion that one already knew what was worth knowing became a more serious and more difficult obstacle to overcome than diffidence had been earlier.

These changes in student temper were of course not universal--one had to be careful that one did not take the vocal students as the voice of "the students." One had to individuate and to distinguish among students in terms of what would be helpful in the development of each one's curiosity--perhaps the quality above all which I sought to encourage as a lifelong outlook.